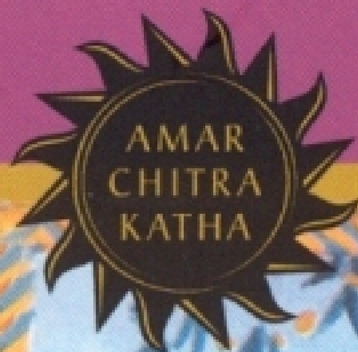
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Adi Shankara



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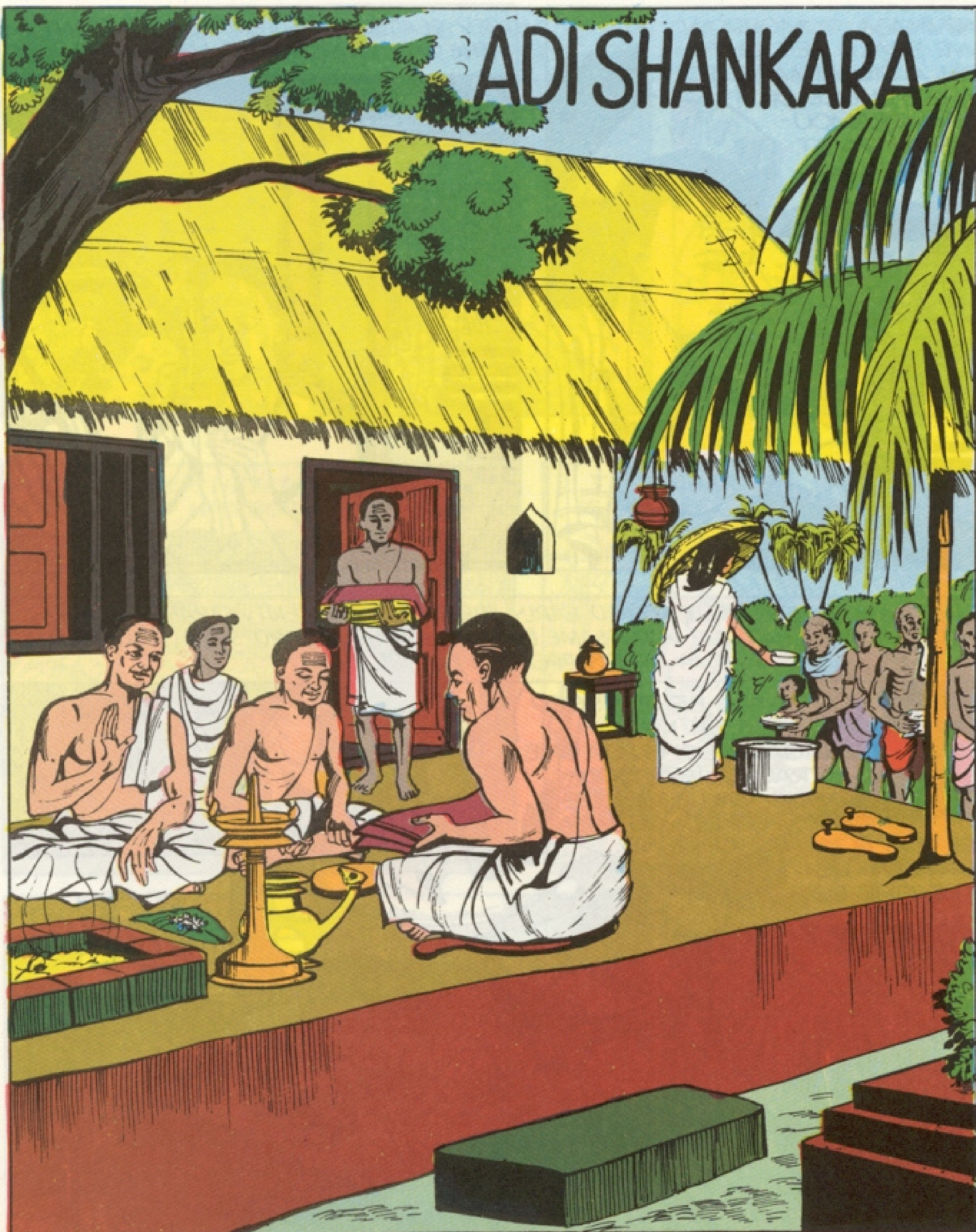
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INDIA BOOK HOUSE

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ADI SHANKARA
OVER A THOUSAND YEARS AGO, IN THE VILLAGE OF KALADI, ON THE RIVER PERIYAR IN KERALA, THERE LIVED A PIOUS COUPLE, SHIVAGURU AND ARYAMBA.





THAT NIGHT, THEY WENT TO BED EARLY, TIRED BUT CONTENT. STRANGE TO SAY, BOTH OF THEM HAD THE VERY SAME DREAM IN WHICH LORD SHIVA, DISGUISED AS A SAGE, APPEARED BEFORE THEM.





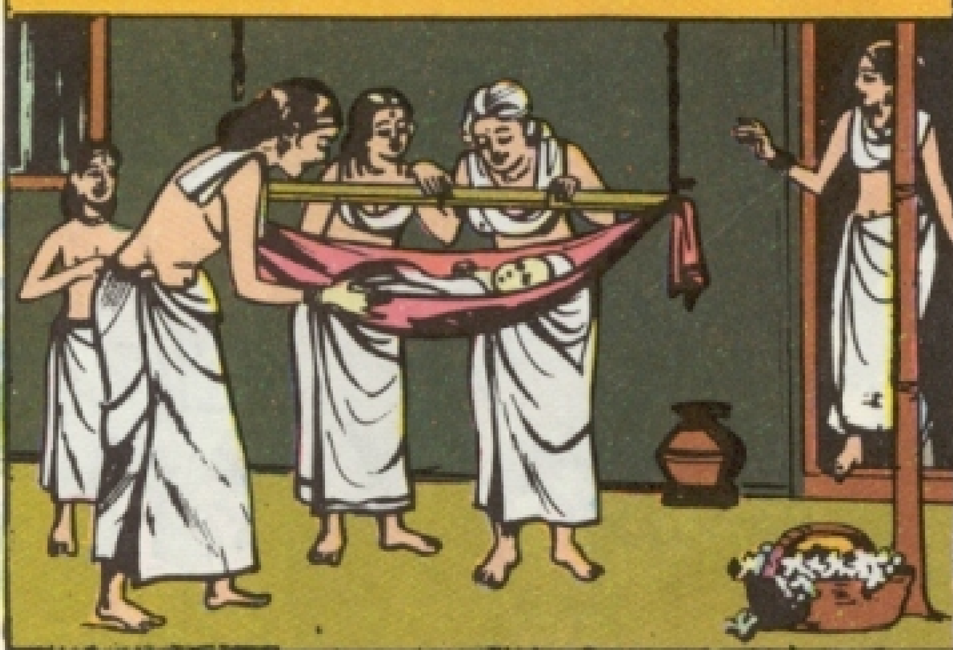
FULL OF JOY, THEY RETURNED HOME TO KALADI THE NEXT DAY, AND CONTINUED TO SERVE THE LEARNED, THE AGED AND THE POOR.





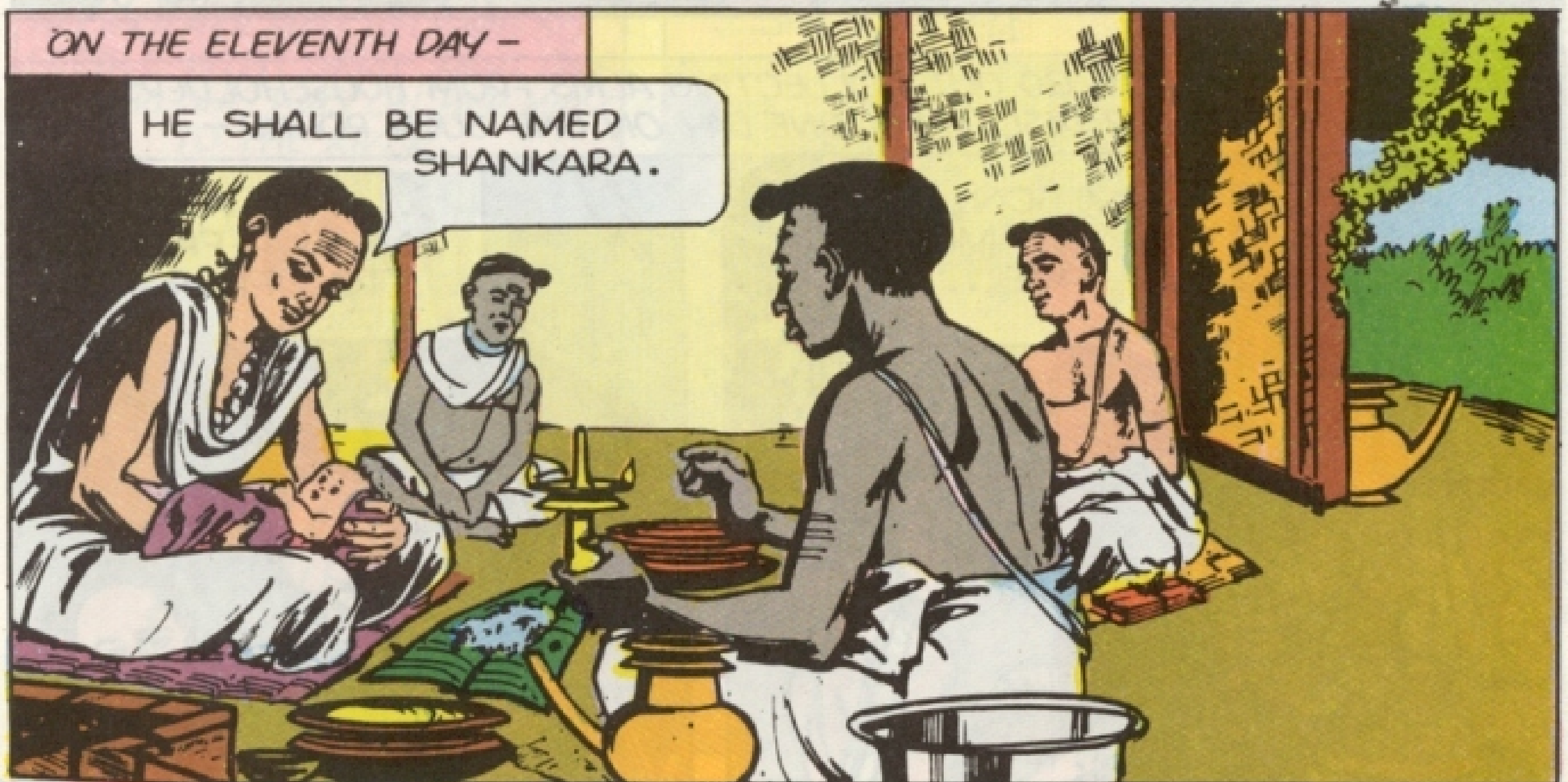


MONTHS PASSED. THEN ONE BRIGHT DAY AT NOON A CHILD WAS BORN TO ARYAMBA.





ON THE ELEVENTH DAY –

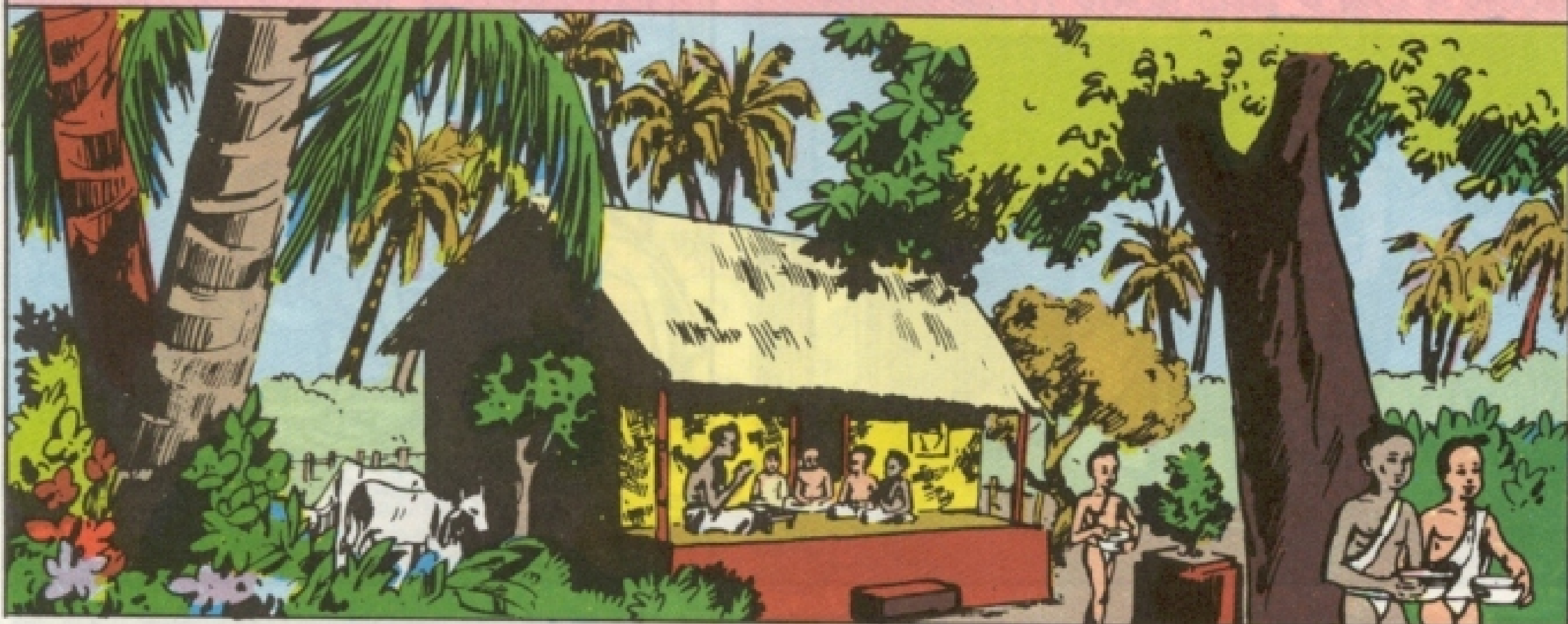


WHEN SHANKARA WAS FIVE YEARS OLD, HE WAS INVESTED WITH THE SACRED THREAD.





THEN HE WENT TO LIVE AND LEARN IN THE HOUSE OF A LEARNED TEACHER, AS WAS THE CUSTOM IN THOSE DAYS.



THE STUDENTS HAD TO GO OUT COLLECTING ALMS FROM HOUSEHOLDERS AS PART OF THEIR DISCIPLINE. ONE DAY ON ONE SUCH ROUND –





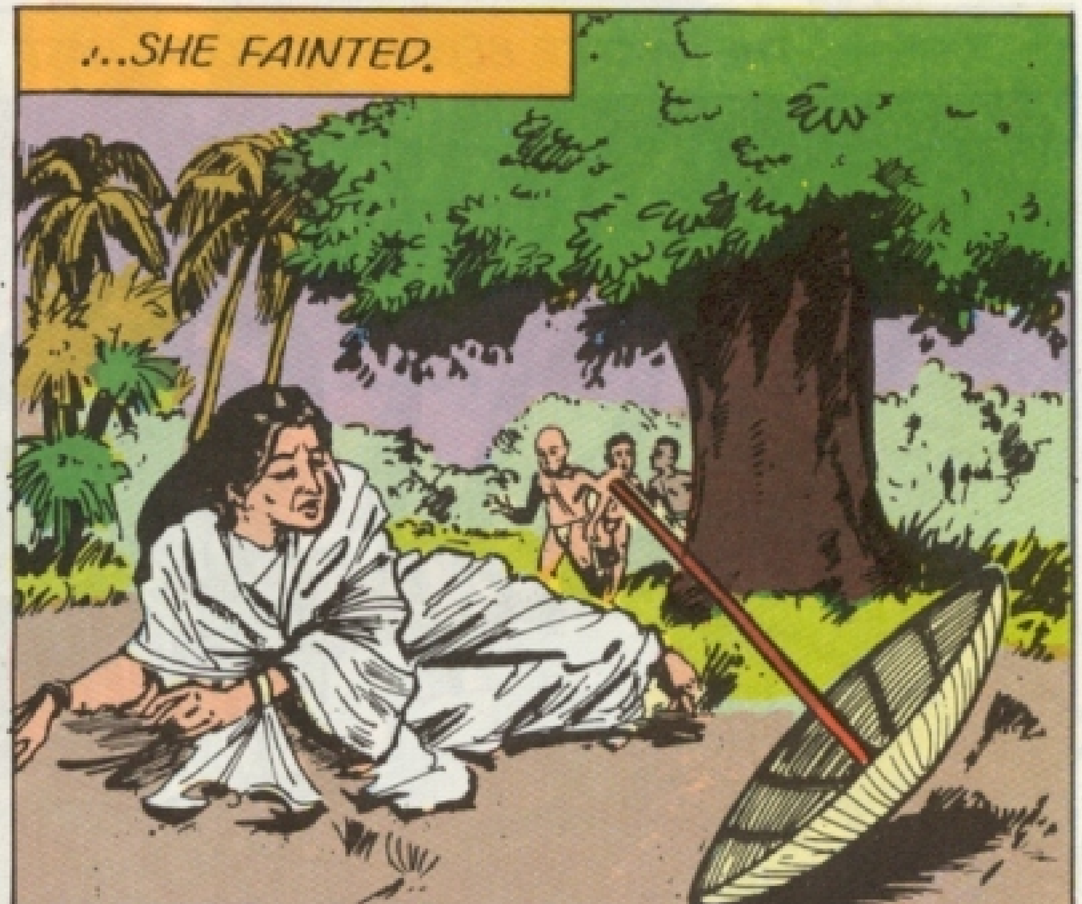

SHANKARA WAS DEEPLY MOVED.
DO NOT GRIEVE, MOTHER. MAY THE BLESSINGS OF THE DIVINE MOTHER BE YOURS.


AND LO! A SHOWER OF GOLDEN AMLAKA FRUIT RAINED FROM ABOVE.


THE BRILLIANT SHANKARA SOON MASTERED ALL THE SCRIPTURES AND RETURNED HOME TO FIND THAT HIS FATHER WAS DEAD.


O, SHANKARA, SHANKARA!


HIS MOTHER HAD BECOME SO FEEBLE WITH GRIEF THAT ONE DAY AS SHE WAS ON HER WAY TO THE RIVER...


...SHE FAINTED.


SHANKARA, WITH THE HELP OF HIS FRIENDS, MANAGED TO TAKE HER HOME.


THERE –
O SHANKARA, WILL I EVER BE ABLE TO BATHE IN THE RIVER?
YES, MOTHER. YES. YOU WILL BATHE IN THE RIVER AS LONG AS YOU WISH.


SHANKARA AND HIS FRIENDS WENT TO THE RIVER, PUT UP A SAND BUND AND MADE THE RIVER CHANGE ITS COURSE.


THE WATER BEGAN TO FLOW PAST HIS HOUSE.
I AM INDEED BLESSED TO HAVE SHANKARA FOR MY SON.


WHILE AT HOME, SHANKARA WAS ALWAYS DEEP IN THOUGHT.
KINGS AT WAR AND INTOLERANT PRIESTS ARE DESTROYING MY COUNTRY. THIS LAND NEEDS UNITY.


SPIRITUAL UNITY COMES FIRST. NATIONAL UNITY WILL FOLLOW. AS A SANYASI I SHALL ACHIEVE THIS.


KING RAJASHEKHARA OF KERALA ADMIRED SHANKARA'S SCHOLARSHIP.
COME AND LIVE IN MY PALACE AS MY COURT POET.
I AM HONOURED, NOBLE KING; BUT MORE PRESSING TASKS AWAIT ME.


SHANKARA THEN APPROACHED HIS MOTHER.
MOTHER, I WISH TO LEAVE HOME AND BECOME A SANYASI. I SEEK YOUR PERMISSION.
HOW CAN YOU BEAR TO LEAVE YOUR MOTHER? BESIDES YOU MUST MARRY. NO! I CANNOT LET YOU GO.

SHANKARA DID NOT GIVE UP HOPE.

I WILL NOT GO WITHOUT MY MOTHER'S PERMISSION. ONE DAY SHE WILL RELENT. I'LL WAIT.



HE DID NOT HAVE TO WAIT LONG. ONE EVENING AS HE WAS BATHING IN THE RIVER –







THREE DAYS LATER SHANKARA LEFT HOME IN SEARCH OF A GURU, TO BE FORMALLY INITIATED AS A SANYASI.





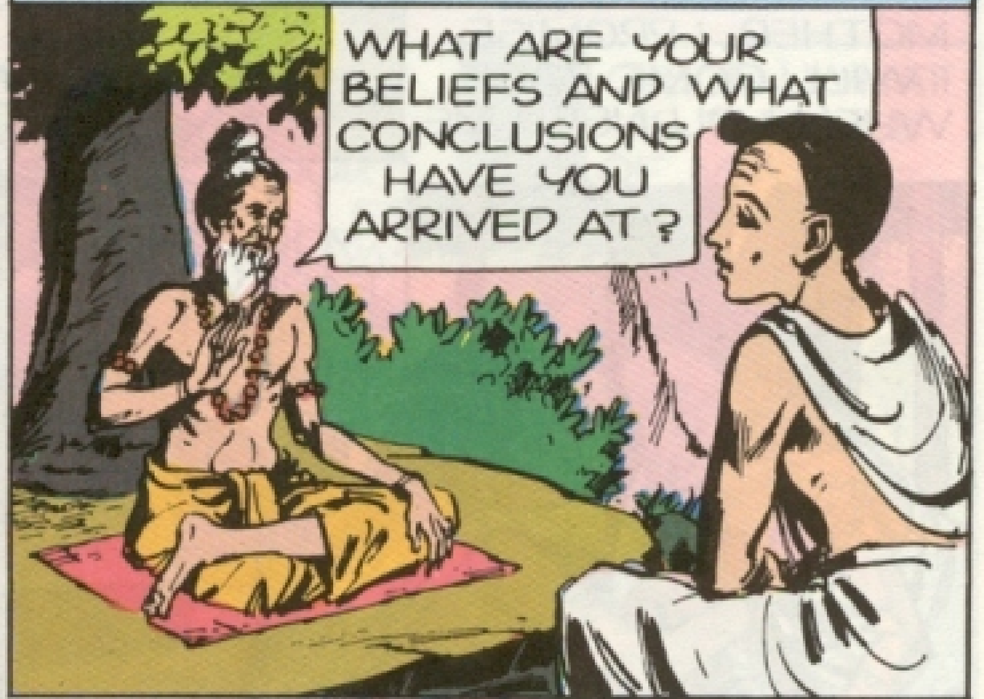
SHANKARA BEGAN THE JOURNEY WHICH TOOK HIM TO EVERY NOOK AND CORNER OF INDIA

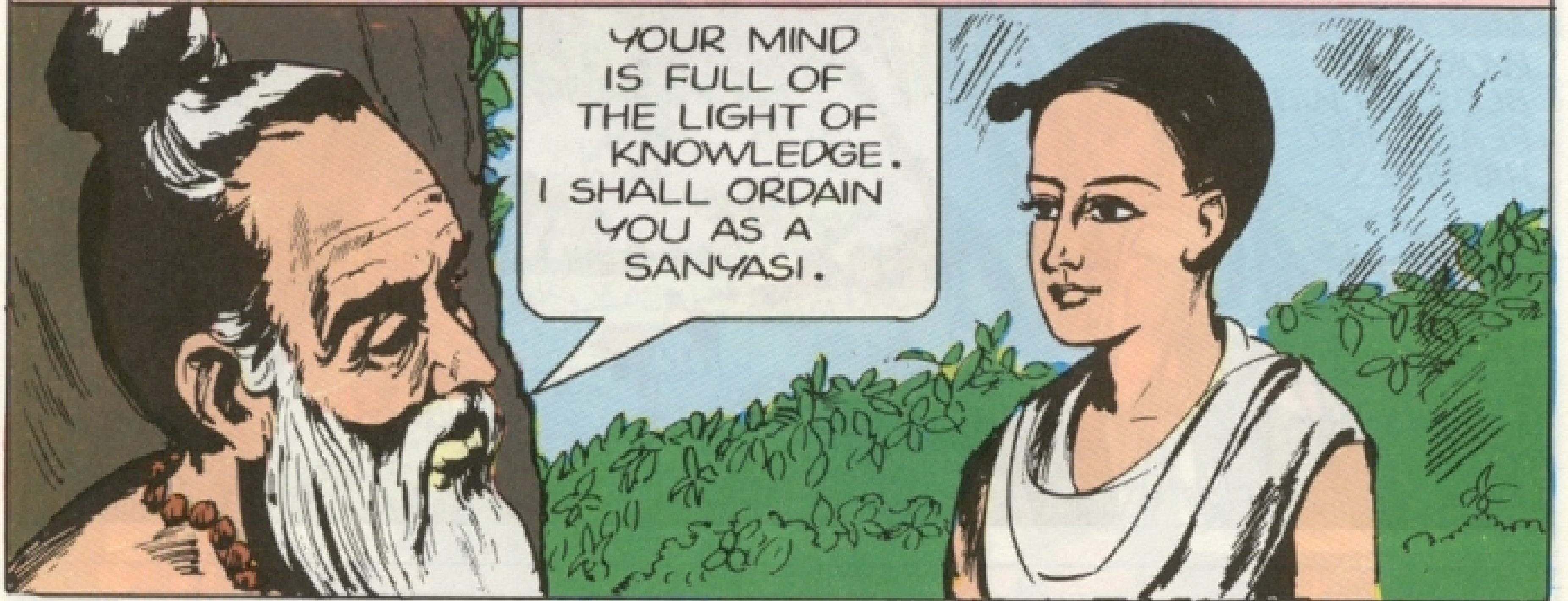


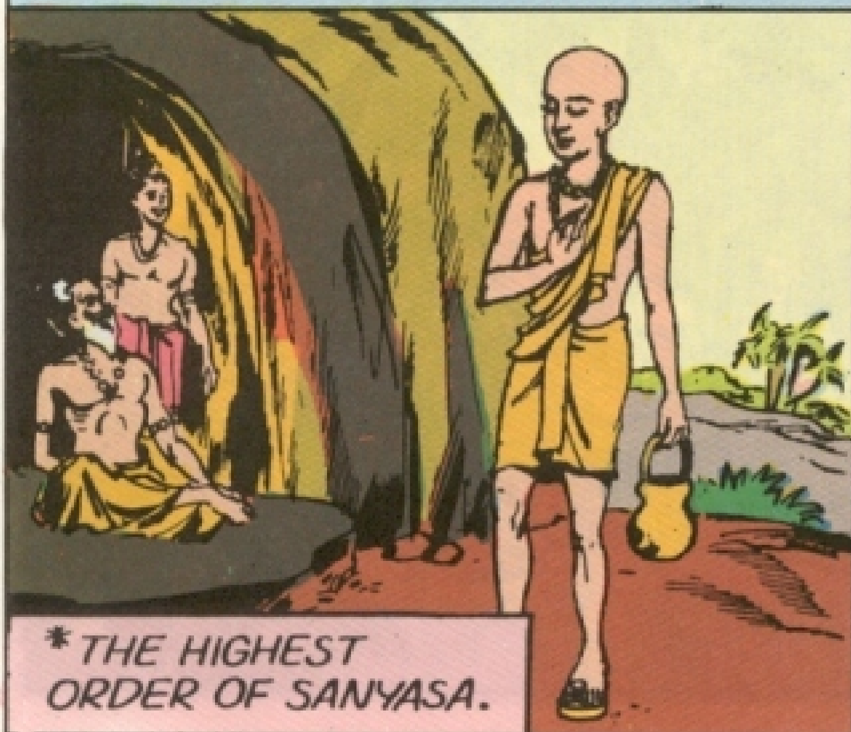
HE TRAVELLED NORTHWARDS TILL HE REACHED THE BANKS OF THE RIVER NARMADA. THERE, IN A CAVE, LIVED THE SAGE GOVIND BHAGAVADPADA AND HIS DISCIPLES.

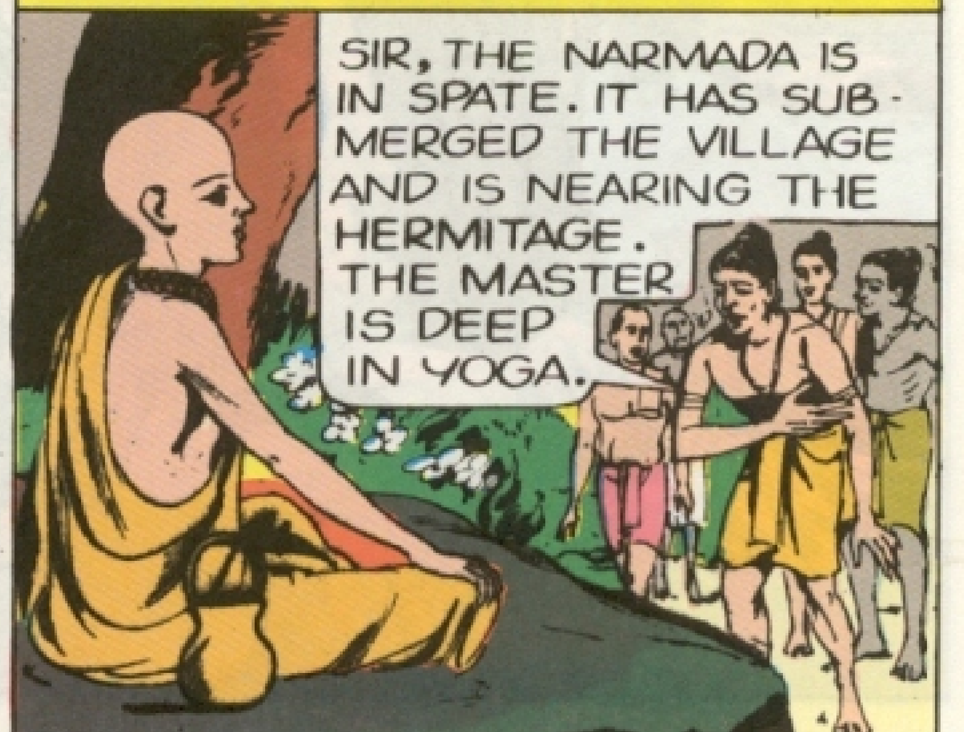


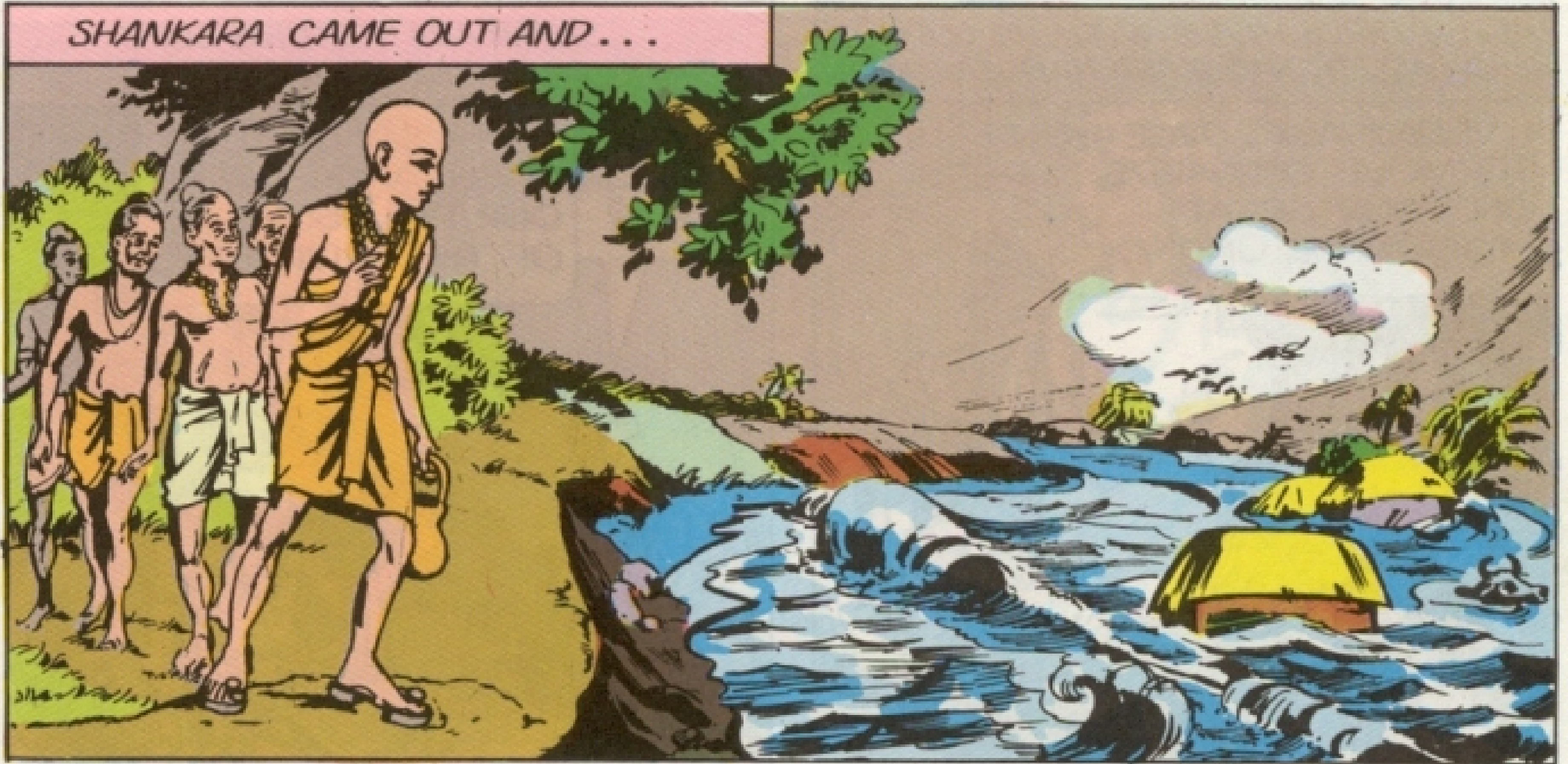

THE TWELVE-YEAR-OLD SHANKARA APPROACHED THE SAGE WITH REVERENCE.
COME, MY SON.


AS THEY SAT TALKING –
WHAT ARE YOUR BELIEFS AND WHAT CONCLUSIONS HAVE YOU ARRIVED AT?


SHANKARA GAVE HIS ANSWER IN JUST TEN VERSES AND GOVIND BHAGAVADPADA WAS HIGHLY IMPRESSED.
YOUR MIND IS FULL OF THE LIGHT OF KNOWLEDGE. I SHALL ORDAIN YOU AS A SANYASI.


SHANKARA WAS ORDAINED *PARAMAHAMSA SANYASI.
*THE HIGHEST ORDER OF SANYASA.


ONE DAY, SHANKARA SAT READY FOR MEDITATION –
SIR, THE NARMADA IS IN SPATE. IT HAS SUB-MERGED THE VILLAGE AND IS NEARING THE HERMITAGE. THE MASTER IS DEEP IN YOGA.



. . . PLACED HIS KAMANDALU IN THE PATH OF THE RISING WATERS.





THE WATER SUBSIDED AND THE RIVER RECEDED TO ITS NORMAL COURSE.



AFTER THREE YEARS WITH HIS GURU HAD PASSED, SHANKARA HAD A VISION.



SHANKARA TOLD HIS GURU OF THE VISION.



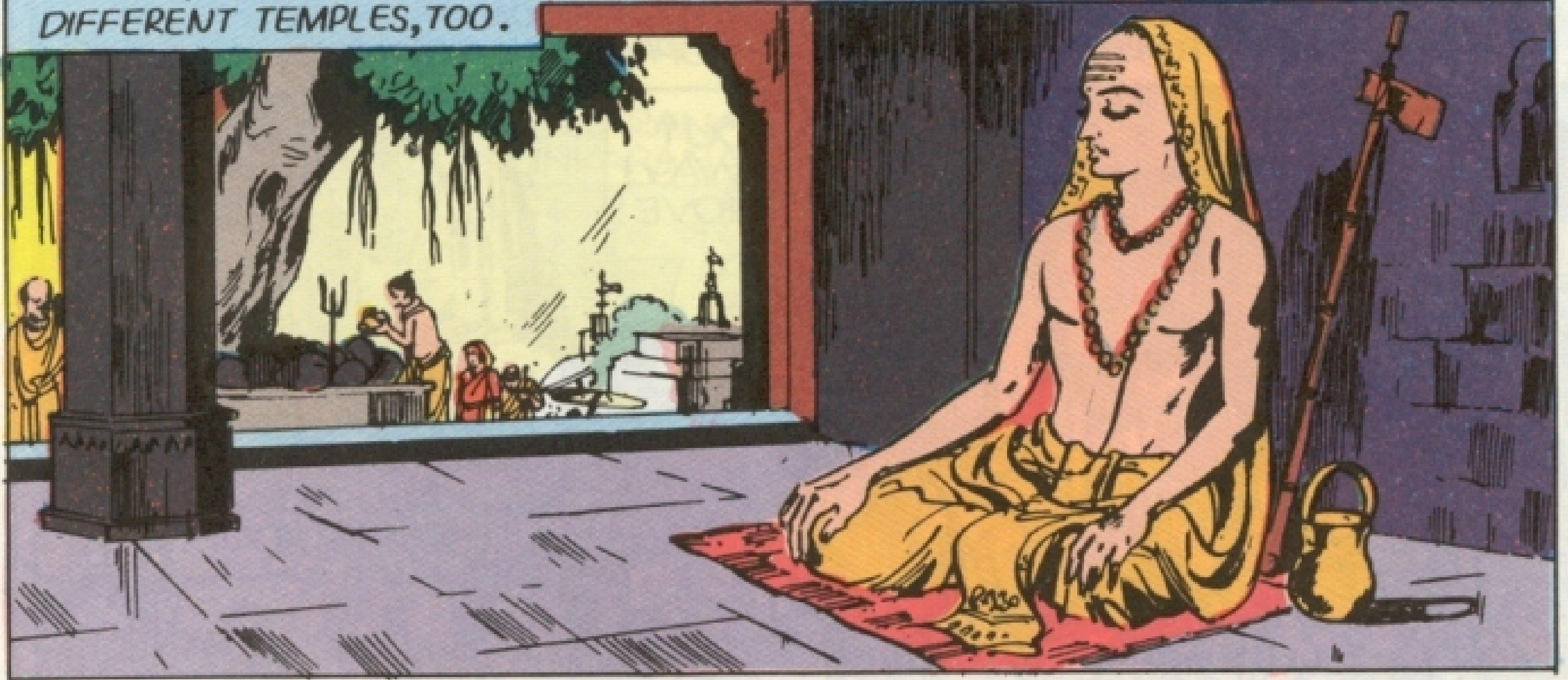
AT KASHI, VISHNU SHARMAN, A SOUTH INDIAN SCHOLAR OF THE CHOLA KINGDOM, CAME TO SHANKARA.



*LATER PADMAPADA.

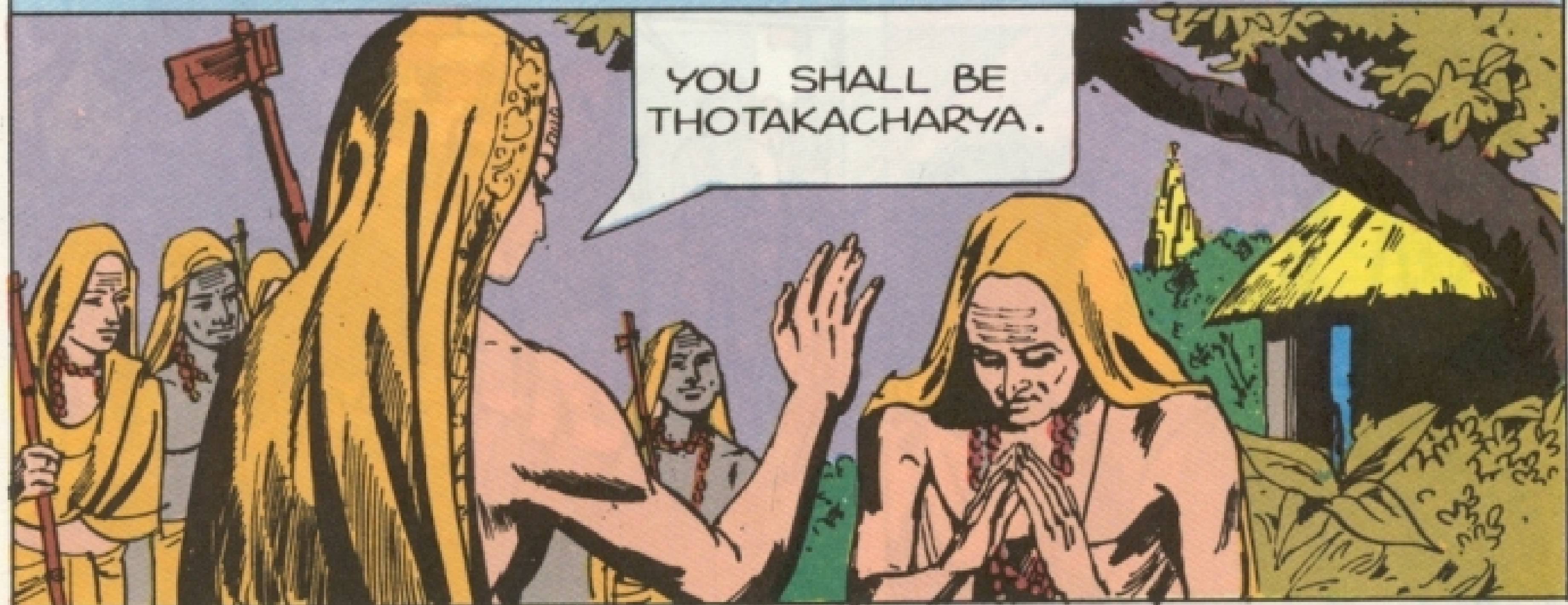
VISHNU SHARMAN, WHO BECAME HIS CLOSEST DISCIPLE, WAS ADMITTED INTO SHANKARA'S ORDER OF SANYASIS.




AT KASHI, SHANKARA NOT ONLY TAUGHT PHILOSOPHY, BUT WORSHIPPED REGULARLY AT DIFFERENT TEMPLES, TOO.


AMONG THE DEVOTEES AT KASHI WAS A FAMOUS POET, KALANANDA, WHO RECITED HIS VERSES TO SHANKARA.
EXCELLENT, KALANANDA!


THEN HE WENT ON IN VERSE FORM TO REQUEST SHANKARA TO ACCEPT HIM AS HIS DISCIPLE.
PRAY BE MY REFUGE, MASTER SHANKARA.
MAY COMPLETE FULFILMENT BE YOURS.


SHANKARA ADMITTED KALANANDA INTO HIS MONASTIC ORDER.
YOU SHALL BE THOTAKACHARYA.

ONE DAY AS SHANKARA AND HIS DISCIPLES WERE RETURNING FROM THE RIVER GANGA, AFTER THEIR BATH AT NOON, AN OUTCASTE CAME FROM THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION.

MOVE OUT OF THE WAY! MOVE! MOVE!

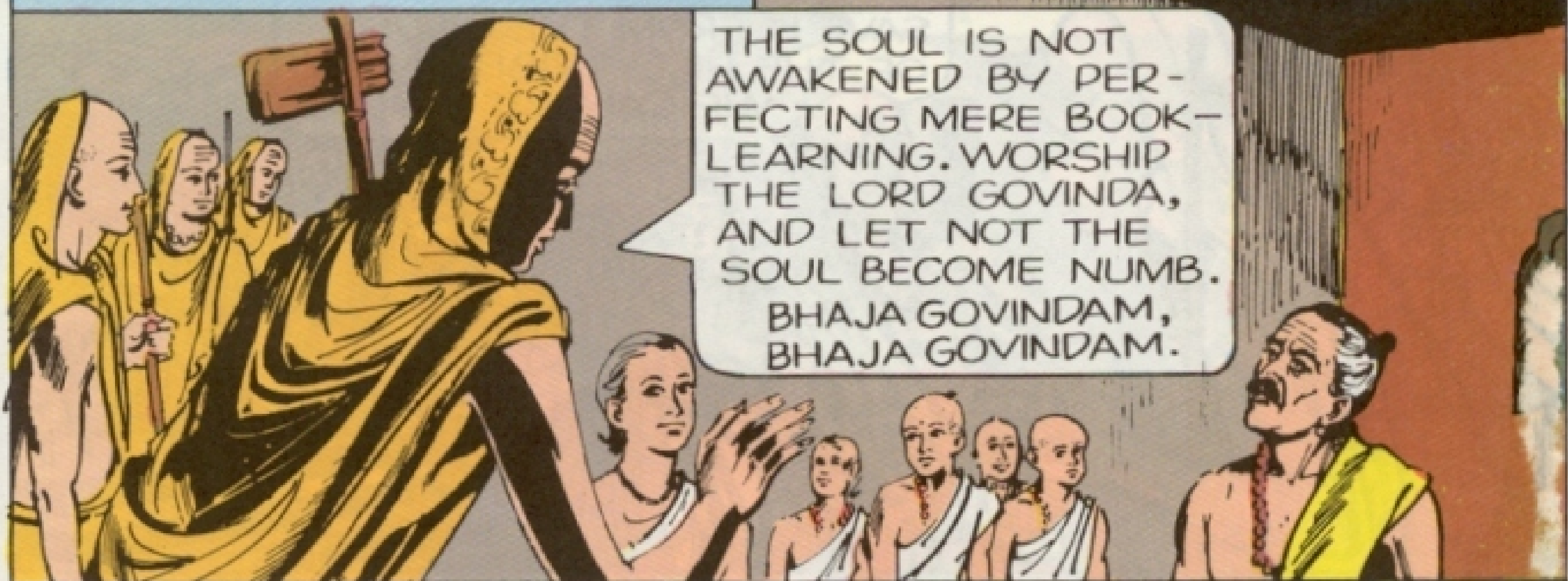
WHAT SHALL I MOVE? MY BODY OF COMMON CLAY OR MY SOUL OF ALL-PERVADING CONSCIOUSNESS?

SHANKARA AT THE SAME MOMENT SAW A VISION.









THROUGHOUT HIS STAY AT KASHI, SHANKARA MET SAGES AND DISCUSSED AND DEFINED HINDUISM WITH THEM.





AT LAST HE DECIDED TO LEAVE KASHI AND WENT NORTH ON HIS MISSION OF PEACE AND UNITY, TO HARIDWAR AND THEN TO RISHIKESH.

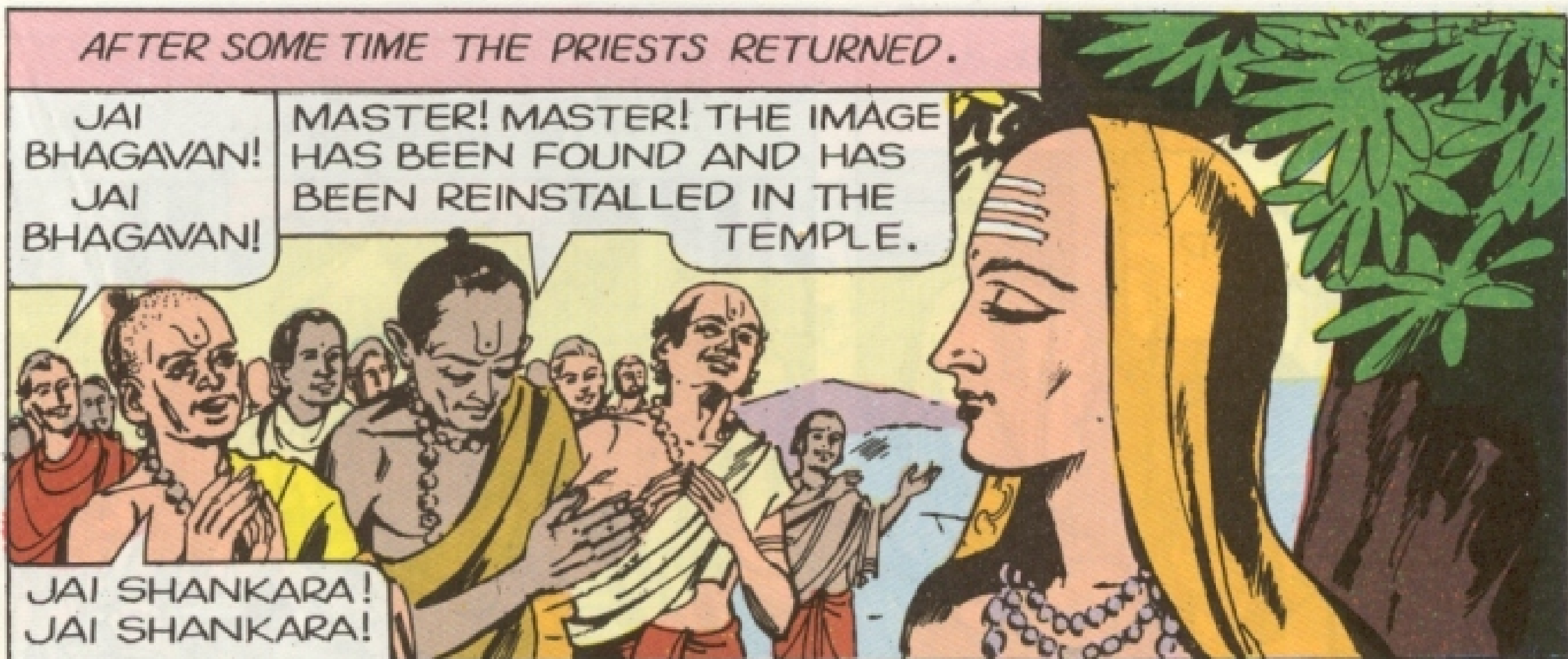


AT RISHIKESH WHEN HE WENT TO THE TEMPLE TO WORSHIP —



SHANKARA WENT TO THE BANKS OF THE GANGA AND —







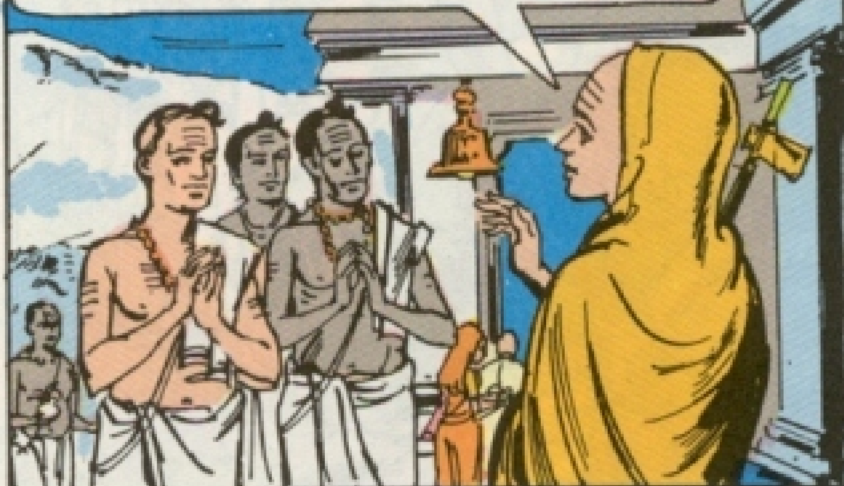
MANY OF THEM WERE REFORMED AND FOLLOWED HIM AS HE PROCEEDED TO BADRINATH.






AT BADRINATH TOO THE IDOL IN THE TEMPLE WAS MISSING.
MASTER, HELP US FIND THE IDOL.


SHANKARA FOUND THE IDOL AND HIMSELF INSTALLED IT IN THE TEMPLE WITH DUE CEREMONY.


THEN CALLING FORTH A FEW NAMBUDIRIS FROM KERALA —
THE TEMPLE AND THE IDOL SHALL HENCEFORTH BE IN YOUR CARE.


SHANKARA THEN WALKED WESTWARD THROUGH THE HIMALAYAS TO KEDARNATH AND AMARNATH.


FROM THERE HE WENT FURTHER NORTH TO GANGOTRI AND UTTARA KASHI, WHERE HE WAS VISITED BY A SAGE.
I HAVE COME FOR SOME CLARIFICATION ON VEDANTIC TEACHINGS.


FOR SEVEN LONG DAYS THEY DISCUSSED HIS DOUBTS. AT THE END OF THE SESSION —
MAY YOUR LIFE-SPAN BE DOUBLED AND THE WORLD BENEFIT BY YOUR WORK.
SHANKARA AT THAT TIME WAS ONLY SIXTEEN YEARS OLD.

SHANKARA AND HIS DISCIPLES THEN RETURNED TO BADRINATH AND LIVED THERE FOR SOME TIME.





ONE DAY SHANKARA CALLED OUT TO HIS DISCIPLE SANANDANA WHO WAS ON THE OPPOSITE BANK OF THE GANGA.

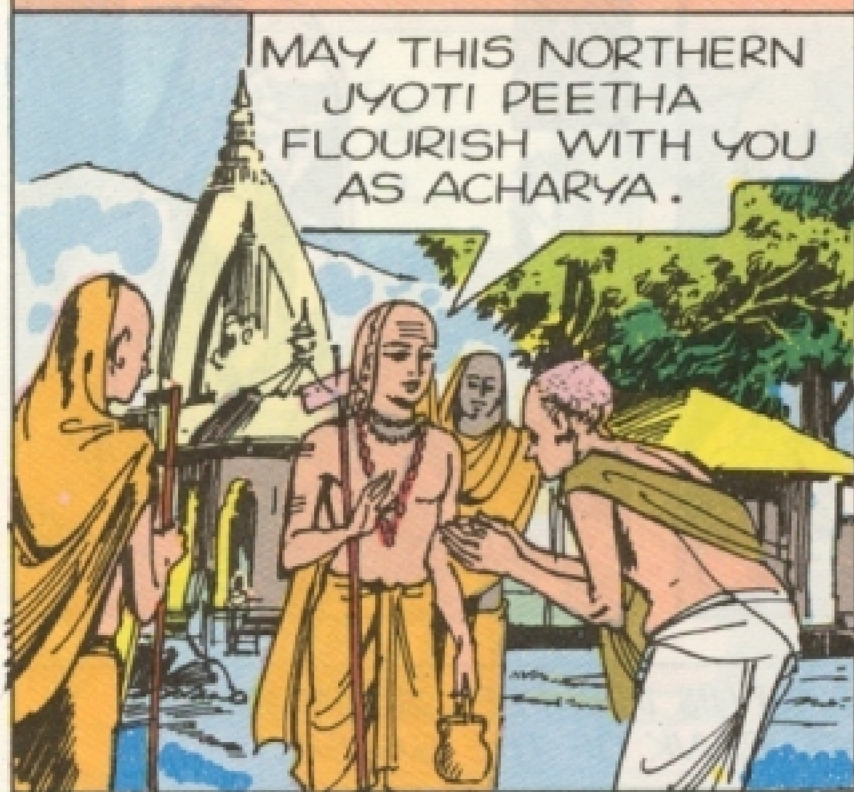


SANANDANA WALKED STRAIGHT OVER THE RIVER AND LO! LOTUSES SPRANG UP BENEATH HIS FEET TO SUPPORT HIM ON THE WATER.



SUCH WAS THE FAITH OF SANANDANA IN SHANKARA.

AT BADRINATH SHANKARA FOUNDED THE JYOTI MATH AND APPOINTED THOTAKACHARYA AS ITS HEAD.



SHANKARA THEN RETURNED TO KASHI. THERE, AT PRAYAG, HE MET KUMARILA BHATTA, THE PURE RITUALIST.

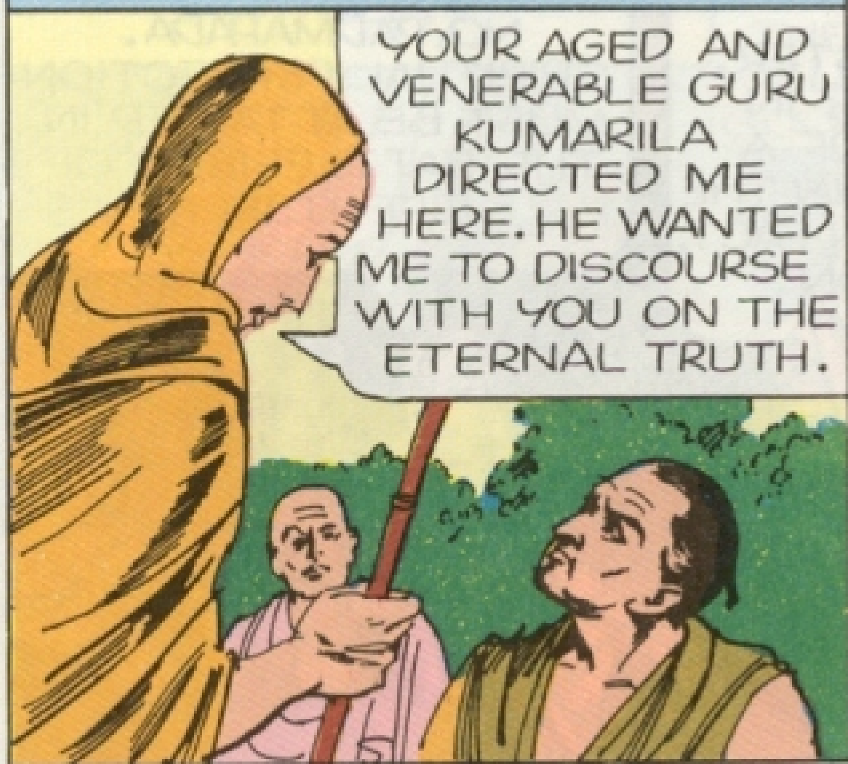


BUT KUMARILA WAS OLD AND ABOUT TO GIVE UP HIS LIFE. SO —



SHANKARA TRAVELLED TO MAHISHMATI WHERE MANDANA MISHRA LIVED. BUT MANDANA WAS NOT HAPPY TO SEE HIM.

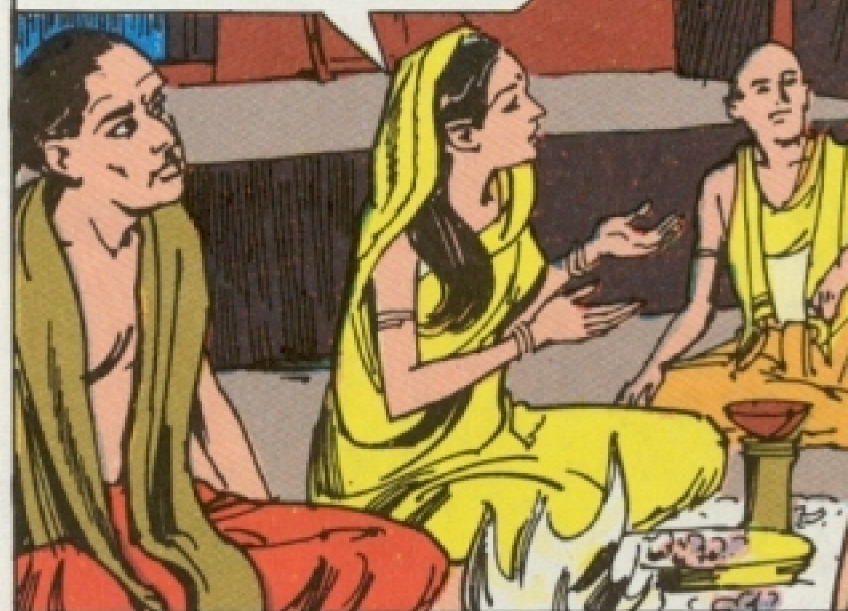



SHANKARA WAS UNPERTURBED.
YOUR AGED AND VENERABLE GURU KUMARILA DIRECTED ME HERE. HE WANTED ME TO DISCOURSE WITH YOU ON THE ETERNAL TRUTH.


SHANKARA THEN TURNED TO MANDANA'S WIFE, SARASWATI.
SALUTATIONS TO THE MOTHER SARASWATI, THE MOTHER OF ALL LEARNING.


IF IT IS MY GURU'S WISH, WE WILL BEGIN DISCUSSIONS STRAIGHT-AWAY.


HE, WHO FAILS TO DEFEND HIS OWN BELIEFS, MUST ACCEPT THE OTHER'S CREED. SARASWATI HERSELF SHALL BE THE JUDGE.


BUT SARASWATI INTERVENED.
HOW CAN A SANYASI, WHO HAS NO EXPERIENCE AS A CITIZEN AND A HOUSEHOLDER, CLAIM COMPLETE KNOWLEDGE?


I ACCEPT YOUR VERDICT, MOTHER. I NEED TO BE WISE IN THE WAYS OF THE WORLD. GIVE ME TIME.


SHANKARA THEN LEFT HIS AMAZED DISCIPLES AND WENT TO A SECLUDED SPOT AMONG THE HILLS. THERE HE TURNED TO FACE THE FAITHFUL PADMAPADA.
MASTER, ISN'T MOTHER SARASWATI WRONG? IN WHAT WAY CAN THE EXPERIENCES OF A CITIZEN AND A HOUSEHOLDER HELP IN THE SEARCH FOR WISDOM? THEY ARE, IN FACT, OBSTACLES TO SPIRITUAL PERFECTION.
NO, PADMAPADA. SPIRITUAL PERFECTION MUST BE ATTAINED IN THE BATTLEFIELD OF LIFE ITSELF.


LISTEN CAREFULLY. I SHALL WILL MYSELF INTO A STATE OF SAMADHI, THROUGH MY YOGIC POWERS.


SHANKARA ASSUMED A YOGIC POSTURE.
MY SOUL TAKES FLIGHT TO ANOTHER BODY. TILL ITS RE-TURN GUARD MY OWN.


SHANKARA'S SOUL TRAVELLED TO A TOWN IN *VANGA-DESHA.
*BENGAL OF TODAY.

THERE, IT BROUGHT TO LIFE THE KING OF VANGA DESHA, WHO WAS ON HIS DEATHBED.



THE KING CAME OUT ON THE BALCONY AND SHANKARA BEGAN EXPERIENCING HIS LIFE OF JOYS AND SORROWS.

SHANKARA EXPERIENCED THE RESPONSIBILITIES AND WORRIES OF A KING. THE FORTS HAD TO BE GUARDED, THE KINGDOM DEFENDED AND THE EVIL-DOERS PUNISHED.

AT SEVERAL GLITTERING DURBARS, HE EXPERIENCED THE JOYS AND LUXURIES OF LIFE TOO.

WHEN SHANKARA HAD GATHERED ENOUGH EXPERIENCE OF A WORLDLY LIFE, ITS GOOD AND EVIL –



SO SHANKARA'S SPIRIT LEFT THE KING'S BODY...



...AND RE-ENTERED HIS OWN.



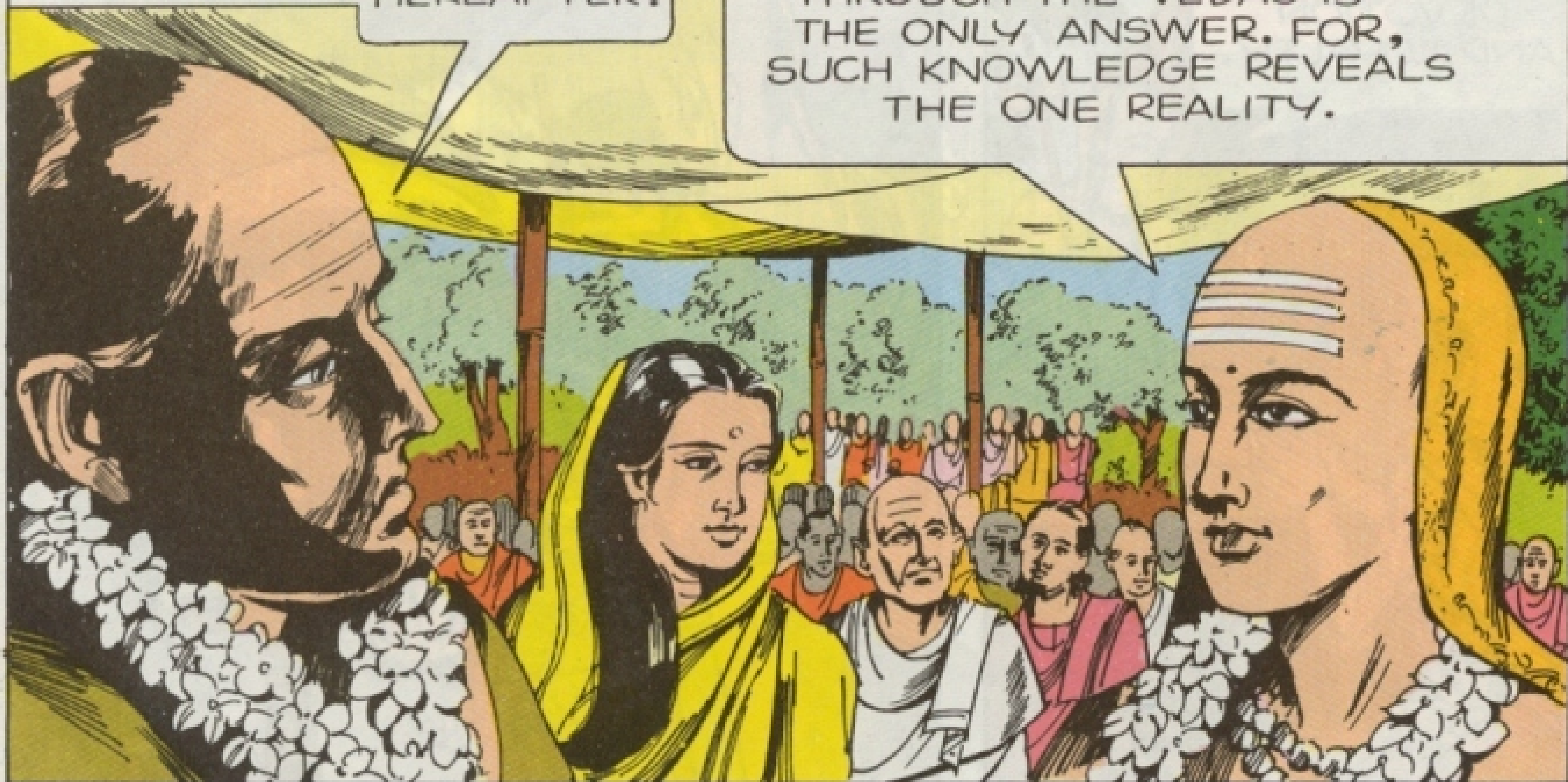
SHANKARA THEN LEFT PADMAPADA AND RETURNED TO PRESENT HIMSELF BEFORE MANDANA MISHRA.



ARRANGEMENTS WERE MADE FOR THE TWO SCHOLARS TO BEGIN.

YOU MAY BEGIN THE DEBATE NOW, WISE ASCETIC. AS THE FLOWERS IN EITHER GARLAND FADE, I WILL KNOW WHOSE FAITH HAS FADED.

THE DEBATE WENT ON FOR A FEW DAYS. THEN –



AT THAT MOMENT THE FLOWERS IN MANDANA'S GARLAND WILTED AND FADED.



MANDANA WAS ORDAINED.

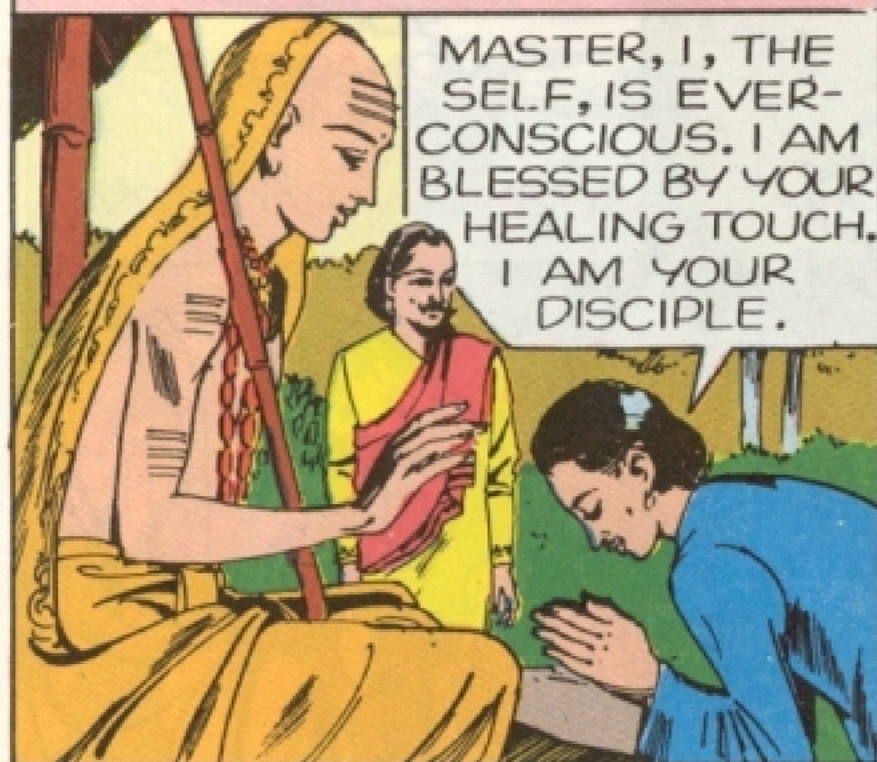


SHANKARA, ACCOMPANIED BY SURESHWARACHARYA AND SARASWATI, THEN TURNED SOUTH, HALTING AT ALL THE HOLY PLACES ON THE WAY, TILL...

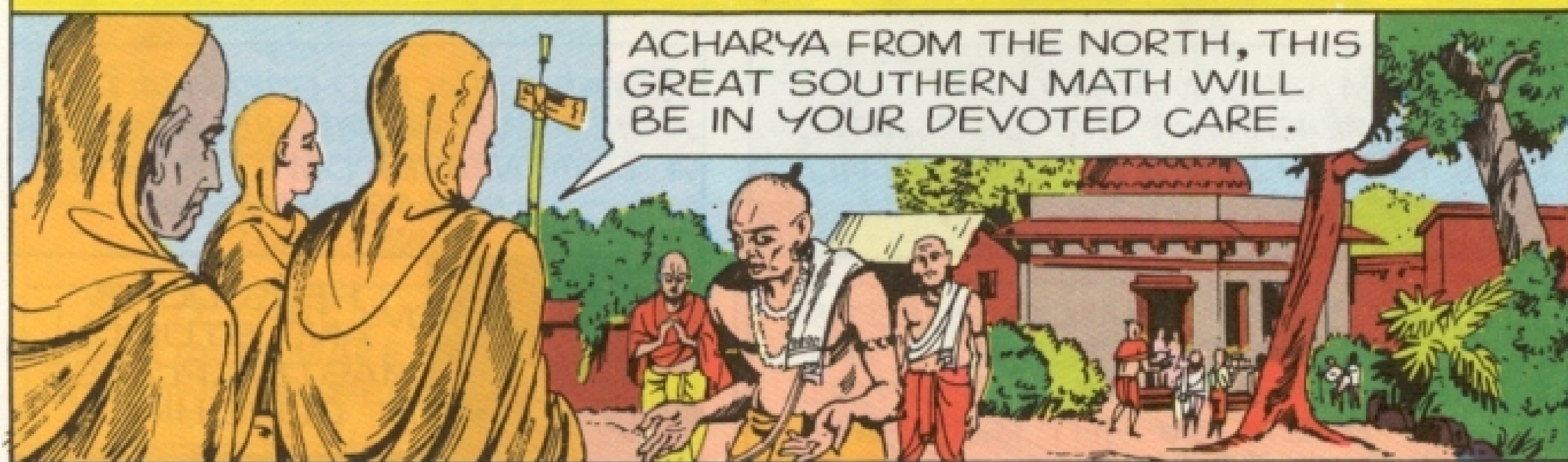


...THEY REACHED GOKARNA. THERE A RICH AND RESPECTED MAN FROM A TOWN NEARBY CAME WITH HIS SON TO SHANKARA.



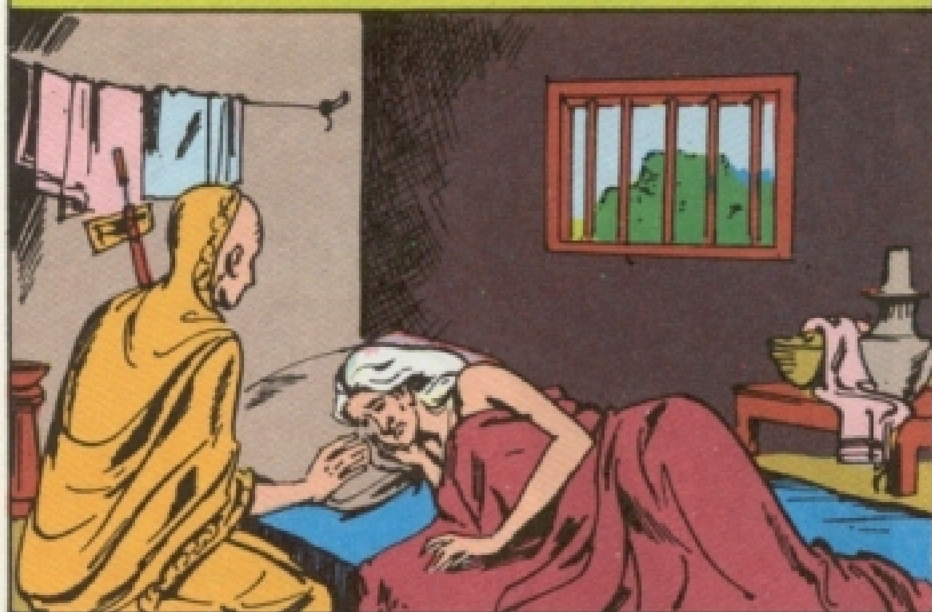

SHANKARA BLESSED THE BOY AND HIS SPEECH WAS RESTORED. THEN TO THE ASTONISHMENT OF ALL—
MASTER, I, THE SELF, IS EVER-CONSCIOUS. I AM BLESSED BY YOUR HEALING TOUCH. I AM YOUR DISCIPLE.

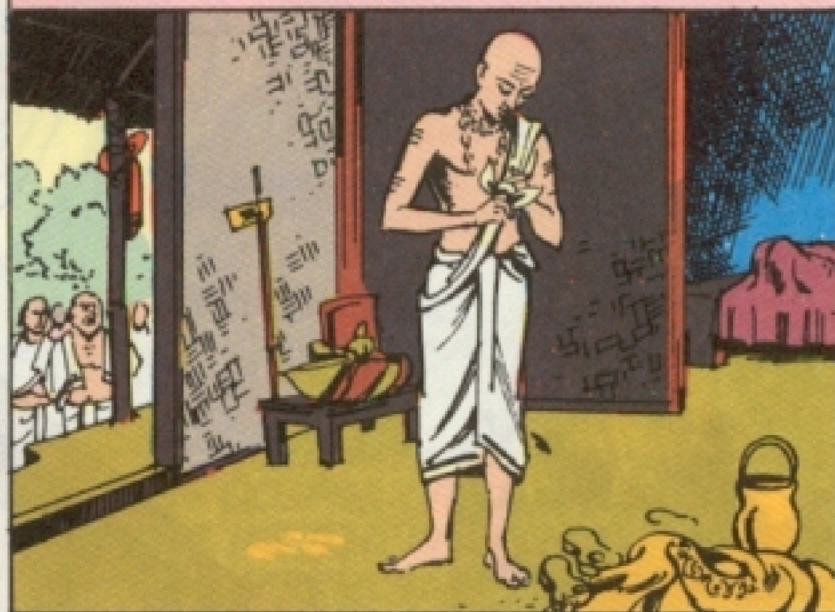

AND THE LAD WAS ORDAINED IN SHANKARA'S MONASTIC ORDER.
YOU ARE AN ADVANCED SOUL. YOUR MONASTIC NAME SHALL BE HASTAMLAKACHARYA.


CONTINUING SOUTH, SHANKARA REACHED SRINGERI, WHERE HE FOUNDED THE SRI SHARADA PEETHA AND INSTALLED SURESHWARACHARYA AS ITS HEAD.
ACHARYA FROM THE NORTH, THIS GREAT SOUTHERN MATH WILL BE IN YOUR DEVOTED CARE.


SHANKARA STAYED ON AT SRINGERI FOR SOME MONTHS THEN ONE DAY HE HAD A PREMONITION.
MY MOTHER NEEDS ME. I MUST HASTEN TO HER SIDE.


JUST THEN SOME SANYASIS FROM KALADI CAME TO HIM.
YOUR VENERABLE MOTHER IS VERY ILL.
I KNOW. I WILL RUSH TO KALADI.


REACHING HIS MOTHER'S BEDSIDE, SHANKARA COMFORTED HER AND IMPARTED TO HER THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE HIGHEST. SHE DIED PEACEFULLY, AN ENLIGHTENED SOUL.


SHANKARA WANTED TO PERFORM HER FUNERAL RITES. SO HE LAID ASIDE HIS OCHRE ROBES, STAFF AND KAMANDALU.


BUT WHEN HE ENTERED THE CHAMBER WHERE THE BODY OF HIS MOTHER LAY—
WHAT! A SANYASI TO PERFORM THE RITES OF A HOUSEHOLDER! NEVER! NEVER!
WE SHALL HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH THE RITES.


THE ORTHODOX NAMBUDIRI COMMUNITY TURNED ITS BACK ON SHANKARA AND THE BODY.


BUT UNDAUNTED, SHANKARA CARRIED THE BODY TO A CORNER OF THE GARDEN AND PLACING IT ON A PYRE OF PLANTAIN STEMS, CREMATED IT. THE ORTHODOX COMMUNITY REPENTED AND ADMIRED SHANKARA'S FILIAL LOVE.*
*TO THIS DAY THE NAMBUDIRIS, UNLIKE OTHER HINDUS, CREMATE THEIR DEAD IN THEIR BACKYARDS.

AFTER HIS MOTHER'S DEATH, SHANKARA TRAVELLED TWICE MORE THROUGHOUT INDIA. ON THE FIRST OF THESE TRIPS, HE ESTABLISHED THE MATHS AT DWARKA IN THE WEST WITH HASTAMLAKA AS ITS HEAD, AND PURI IN THE EAST WITH PADMAPADA AS THE HEAD. SPIRITUAL CENTRES AND TEMPLES ESTABLISHED BY HIM ALSO FLOURISH AT KANCHI, PASHUPATINATH AND OTHER CITIES.



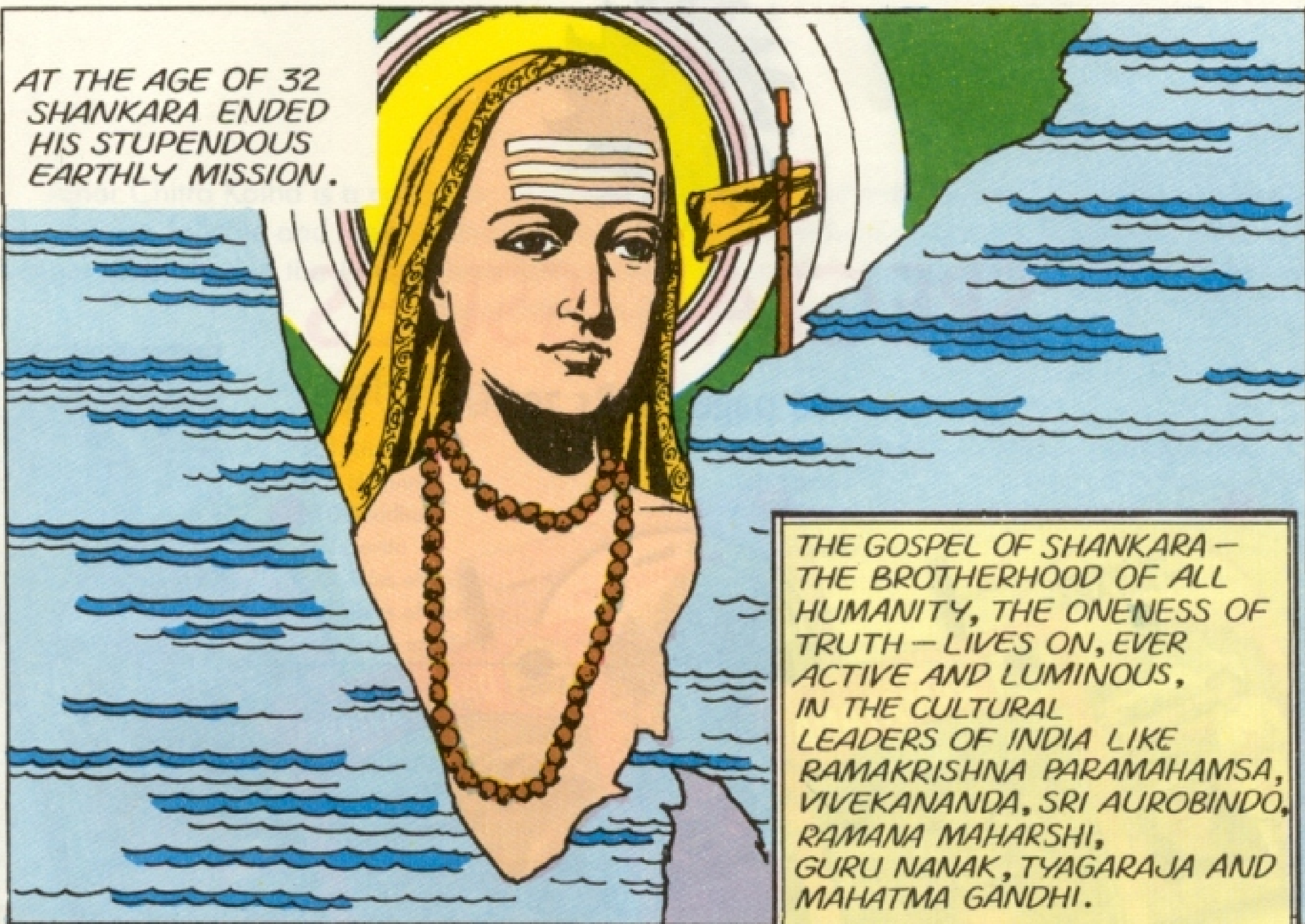


HE VISITED ASSAM, NEPAL, KASHMIR, TIBET AND BACTRIA TOO ON THESE TOURS. THROUGHOUT, HE ENJOYED THE PATRONAGE AND PROTECTION OF KINGS AND SCHOLARS. AT SRINAGAR, HE HONOURED AN EMINENT LADY SCHOLAR BY PLACING A *TARANGA ON HER HEAD. TO THIS DAY IN SRINAGAR THE TARANGA SIGNIFIES SCHOLARSHIP.



*A SPECIAL HEAD-DRESS RESEMBLING A TURBAN.

HIS GOSPEL WAS CARRIED TO SOUTH-EAST ASIA TOO, BY A DISCIPLE, SHIVA SOMA, A NEPHEW OF JAYAVARMAN II, THE KING OF KAMBHOJA (CAMBODIA).



Sayings of Adi Shankara

- Just as a piece of rope is imagined to be a snake (in the darkness) so is Atman (soul) determined to be the body by an ignorant person.
- Neither by Yoga, nor philosophy, nor by work, nor by learning but by the realization of one's identity with Brahman is liberation possible, and by no other means.
- When the mind becomes purified like a mirror, Wisdom is revealed in it. Care should therefore be taken to purify the mind.
- The world is filled with attachments and aversions and is changing like a dream; it appears to be real as long as one is ignorant, but becomes unreal when one is awake.
- Atman is the ruler of the body (matter), and is internal; the body is the ruled, and is external; and yet the people see these two as one! What else can be called ignorance but this?
- There are good souls, calm and magnanimous, who do good to others as does the spring, and, who having themselves crossed this difficult ocean of birth and death, help others also to cross the same, without any motive whatsoever.
- A father has got his sons and others to free him from his debts, but he has got none but himself to remove his bondage.
- Be not blindly attached to friend or foe, to son or kinsman, to peace or war. If you aspire for Vishnu's realm, look upon all things as of equal worth or opportunity.



Illustrated Classics From India

Adi Shankara

Shankara's life may be compared to a brilliant flash of lightning that eradicated many areas of darkness in the life of man. He had an intellect that probed fearlessly, a mind that questioned constantly and a heart that felt deeply. Out of these God-given gifts, and thirty-two years of tireless seeking, arose a great system of philosophy, Advaita, and an inspiring body of devotional literature.

Shankara travelled throughout India, preaching that the Self or Brahman is one – undivided and imperishable. The rest is Maya or illusion. We are told of his historic debate with the sage, Madana Mishra, when the latter withdrew defeated. An even greater story tells us how Shankara, the learned Brahman, bowed to the superior wisdom of a lowly outcaste, accepting him as a Guru.

He established several *maths* to spread his philosophy. Then, as now, the disruptive forces of religion, race, caste and language threatened to weaken the fabric of the one nation that is India. Now, as then, the teachings of a man like Shankara, who believed in the One Undivided Self, reinforces a sense of unity among indians.

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